

# CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

## What is this chapter about?

This chapter sets a context for reading the Old Testament by briefly surveying trends in scholarship over the past hundred years or so. There is discussion about the differences between historically-based and literary-based methods of criticism, and an introduction to the tenets of practical theology.

## What books are referred to?

The only book specifically referred to is W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, vol. 1 1961; vol. 2 1967). However, this is not a book to attempt at this stage.

## What other books would be helpful?

Books which will be useful points of reference throughout the course include: J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998) and James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1999), as well as other more basic Old Testament Introductions such as R. Coggins, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). An excellent companion for exploring the issues around the history of the Old Testament period is George Mendenhall, *Ancient Israel's Faith and History* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). A good introduction to issues of interpretation, once you've gained in confidence, is W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). A selection of introductory books which have found favour during the last

twenty-five years or so would include: J. Rogerson (ed.), *Beginning Old Testament Study* (London: SPCK, 1983); J. N. Schofield, *Law, Prophets and Writings* (London: SPCK, 1969); J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984); C. Westermann, *Handbook to the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1969); and R. Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (London, SCM Press, 1985).

On literary methods of criticism in particular, the following reading list would be helpful:

David Gunn and Danna Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Post-modern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), Mark Allen Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (London: SPCK, 1993); and A. K. M. Adam, *What is Post Modern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

## How is the chapter organized?

The key topics dealt with are: what the title question means; how historically-based methods of criticism work; how literary-based methods of criticism work; what difference practical theological approaches make.

## What should I be able to do by the end of this chapter?

Recognize current trends in critical study and their antecedents.

Distinguish between types of critical approach.

# 1

## Why Read the Old Testament?

Usually, questions about *how* to do something are intimately tied up with questions about *why* it is being done. As a general rule that is also true of scholarship. The critical tools chosen are chosen precisely because they will yield the results that will best answer the questions the researcher is asking. With Old Testament scholarship, the last hundred years or so have seen an increasing frustration on the part of many scholars that the *how* questions and the *why* questions have become more and more separated. I remember speaking to an elderly clergyman about a beach mission in which he had been involved. He spoke with evident pride of the part he had played. ‘At the beginning of the afternoon’, he said, ‘the children were all building sandcastles. But by the end of the afternoon they were building Palestinian houses.’ I tried to look enthusiastic. But in truth I had my doubts that the organizers of the mission would have stated as one of their aims that children should know more about ancient building practice.

If you were to ask most people I know who have tried it, why they read the Old Testament, I think their replies might include variations on some of these themes.

- To learn more about God;
- To learn more about how faith communities tick;
- To learn more about life, its meaning and purpose; and so
- To know how to behave, what attitudes to adopt, what to strive for.

## Reflection on experience

Think for a moment about why you want to read the Old Testament. Do any of the points above correspond to your aims? Do you have others you can add to the list? You might want to learn something that will inform views about how church life should be organized today, for example. How will you check, upon completing this book, whether it has done what you want it to do for you? You might like to jot down a few sentences beginning: 'When I have read this book I expect . . .' Keep the list and use it when you do reach the end to assess its success. If you are using the book in a group compare your expectations with others and see how many you have in common.

I doubt if many people would put 'I want to learn more about an ancient culture' at the top of the list, though it may be something you would like to know about in passing. It might seem perverse, then, that by the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars were concerned that the critical methods they were using were so failing to yield answers to the questions they were really asking that they felt constrained to start a completely new discipline called Old Testament theology to redress the balance. They were concerned that the methods adopted by scholars at that time had led to a lot of knowledge about little bits of the text, but very little about the big picture. They were concerned that there was a very full account available about religious ideas generally current in the ancient Near East, but very little attention paid to what was distinctive about Old Testament faith specifically. They feared that study to date was relatively superficial, lacking real engagement with the significance of what was described, nor having depth in meaning. They saw little contact with New Testament scholarship, or attempt to make meaningful links between the two Testaments that make up the Christian Bible. They accepted that quite a lot was known about religion in the sense of ritual and institutional practice but very little about how people understood or apprehended God in all this. A man called Walter Eichrodt was the first to try and address these concerns in a ground-breaking book called *Theology of the Old Testament*, first published in 1933. So how on earth did we get into this situation?

It's probably all down to the cultural movement we have already referred to called Modernism. Up until the Enlightenment, most people read the Old Testament primarily as a way of throwing more light on and providing a context for the New Testament. Ways of interpreting the text were relatively free and included *allegorical* and *typological* reading. An **allegory** is a story in which each of the parts of the story stands for something else. So for example, Song of Songs, which is an erotic love poem, was seen as an allegory in which the two lovers were actually Jesus and the church. Probably, it was because the book was seen in this way that it made it into the Old Testament at all. **Typology** sees models or types in the Old Testament that will reach their full presentation in the New. So the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 is seen as a type, a model, a forerunner of the real thing when God was content to see his son sacrificed on the cross, and so on. There are plenty of examples in the New Testament itself of reading the Old Testament in this way (see for example: Galatians 4.21—5.1; 1 Corinthians 10.1–11; John 3.14f.). With the advent of scientific thinking, led by Descartes and others, Christians began to feel like poor relations in the academic world. It was as if scientists had the real truth from the real world, testable by evidence and proof, and all Christians could offer were stories, allegories and fables. Scholars came to the defence of Christianity by trying to show that their truths, too, were open to rational enquiry and that Christianity was something more than a refuge for the ill-educated and ignorant. They wanted Bible study to hold its place in the academy. To do this they adopted the critical methods used by historians.

The so-called historical critical method of studying the Bible brought some new conditions and assumptions to the task. For historians and scientists, *objectivity* is a prime virtue. It is not enough that I think something. It has to be open to demonstrable proof such that anyone seeing the evidence will come to a common conclusion. For historians, *originality* is what is aimed for. With regard to texts, if I want to find out what a text really means I have to discover what it meant to those who first wrote it or those who first read and heard it. The task is to work back and try to uncover the layers of meaning which have overlaid a text over centuries, to get to that original meaning. There was, then, for those who followed this method, a real interest in how texts came to assume their current form. The assumption was

that there is *one correct meaning* and one means of discovering it. Another assumption was that the text itself holds all the answers. It is *all-disclosing*. Current experience had no part to play in determining truth or meaning. It must be said that scholars saw this as an act of faith. This kind of enquiry, like science itself, was just one more way, they thought, of revealing God's great story, the plan of the creator. Religion had nothing to fear from science or academic investigation. A final consequence was that whereas until the Enlightenment the texts had been in the ownership, so to speak, of the church – it was the church that finally decided on matters of meaning in the texts – now a degree of ownership had been handed to the academics, albeit that they themselves were Christians. But the result was that in order to really appreciate the meaning of the texts you needed *experts*, people who could tell you what was originally meant because they had done the historical and textual research to enable them to do so. The ordinary reader was inadequate without them.

This development led to two kinds of tension, still discernible today. One was between the Christian academics and other academics who still looked with suspicion on religion. This came to a head on several occasions in the nineteenth century, largely to do with questions about evolution, and the method and date of creation. The other kind of tension was between Christian academics and the rest of the Christian community. Academics were increasingly accused of being out of touch with their base faith community. One response to this was a conservative backlash which would have nothing at all to do with academia or critical approaches and which opted for a kind of fundamentalism. With the benefit of hindsight one can have some sympathy with all sides of this debate.

## Reflection on experience

How important is it, do you think, for reading the Old Testament, to have experts? And, if it is important, what kind of experts should they be? Come back to this question at the end of this chapter and see if your views have changed at all.

And so the kind of scholarship which was pursued with regard to the Old Testament, accompanied by new interest in archaeology, and discovering the facts from the desert sands, concentrated on how the texts were put together and transmitted, and what were the precise meanings of obscure Hebrew phrases. There was research into the possible routes taken during the Exodus, into the exact composition of religious rituals and festivals, and how what the Old Testament bore witness to was attested by other sources and other evidence of religious life in the ancient Near East among Israel's neighbours. Little by little the key indicator of success came to be proving that what the Bible described really did happen, or, somewhat later, that it did conform to patterns discernible in the religious life of the area. So we arrived at the situation which made Eichrodt and others so anxious. The early twentieth century saw sterling attempts to address his concerns while still adhering to the general rules and assumptions of the historical critical method.

It is important to stress that not all this work had a negative result. Even those who in more recent times have adopted different methods of reading, acknowledge their debt to it. The work does help us to understand how the books of the Bible were formed and it helps us to appreciate the contexts from which it derived. It has rescued the Bible, and the Old Testament in particular, from being seen in a superstitious way as unrelated to real people and events, somehow just dictated from heaven. It has helped us to a more sophisticated understanding of the role of ritual and symbol, very important in the Old Testament, and to see the people of Old Testament times as, in a sense, people like us. It has denied any interpretation of the texts that sees them as a simple textbook for life, like the Highway Code, which can easily be understood and applied as a ready reference in all modern situations. The writings were designed for specific times, situations and cultures, and their authors had no awareness that they were contributing to Holy Writ or that they would be read in a completely different culture thousands of miles away and thousands of years in the future. I find salutary the story of the man whose reason for reading the Bible was to gain guidance in situations of perplexity, and who believed it could be read without any critical understanding at all. His method was simply to open the book at random and run his finger down the page until he felt called to stop. When one such situation

arose he followed this pattern and read ‘And Judas went and hanged himself.’ Thinking this was a strange response to his predicament he tried again, and read, ‘Go thou and do likewise.’

By the end of the twentieth century, the Modern era was drawing to its close. Western society no longer believed that there was one big truth, one big story, to be discovered or to be part of. The cry was now: ‘You show me your truth and I’ll show you mine.’ This cultural move coincided with a new move in biblical criticism. Instead of examining the Bible using the insights and methods of historians, there was a new move to examine it using the methods and insights used by students of literature.

## Reflection on experience

What do you think might be the differences for you between reading an historical document using the methods outlined above and reading an historical novel or a Shakespeare history play? Think about:

- what you need to know in order to appreciate the work
- whether you need expertise
- whether ‘what really happened’ is important
- the things that would most interest you in studying the novel or play
- how you would decide what the message of the work was and whether it was important to you.

For literary scholars there is not just one meaning but lots of them, and effectively the reader decides where the truth lies, though it may still be important to see how the writer’s art is employed to persuade you of one truth rather than another. With this approach, originality is not the key thing because a truly great work of literature may have layers of meaning to subsequent generations which were not dreamt of by the original author. Subjectivity rather than objectivity is important. If I am moved by a passage that leaves you cold it does not mean that one of us is right and another wrong. There is little interest in how the work was researched or how it reached its final form. And importantly, culturally, you no longer *need*

experts, useful though they may be in some circumstances. Proponents of these approaches would claim therefore that the text was freed from either scholarly or ecclesiastical control. We shall examine some of the repercussions of this in subsequent chapters, but in general this has led to a whole new critical enterprise with regard to the Old Testament, where most of what is said about God is contained in narratives or stories.

## Literary criticism

The term 'literary criticism' is used by different scholars in different ways. Rather confusingly the term can be used to describe some aspects of historical criticism! Those scholars who want to claim that the critical methods appropriate for a study of literature are preferable to those employed by historians speak about:

- *Narrative*: they analyse character and plot, and are particularly interested in those parts of the Old Testament which are written in story form;
- *Rhetoric*: they analyse the literary devices a writer uses to persuade us of a particular point of view;
- *Reader-response*: they analyse the text by reading into it rather than reading out of it: by **eisegesis** rather than **exegesis**, whose chief interest is in the effect the text has on us, and the connections we make as a result of reading it;
- *Structure*: they look for patterns in the writing which are universal to all literature and allow links to be made with anthropological studies about how people communicate ideas, and with how languages have developed.

This kind of critical approach is still at an early stage but many would claim that as a method it stands a better chance of answering Eichrodt's anxieties than does historical method. A basic problem is that it ignores the question 'What really happened?' which many Christians believe is to some degree important in their faith. The method was, after all, devised to study fiction. Also, as a reaction to historical method it runs the risk of

throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Even if we come to regard the Bible more and more as a literary work we shall still be interested in the question about what kind of people wanted to tell their story in this way or what kind of experiences informed and prompted their storytelling. We might also develop more of an interest in how different readers have understood it through the ages (what scholars call reception history). One of the things we shall see about the Old Testament itself is that it bears witness to the fact that different generations of readers in ancient times reinterpreted their ancient traditions in different ways to enable them to speak to their own generation. It is probably best to keep an open mind and allow our questions to be informed by both ways of reading the text.

It could well be that, like me, your reasons for and expectations about reading the Old Testament owe something to ideas about how the Bible should be used by the Christian community. In other words they could be part of a response to the question, what is the function of the Bible in the church? Throughout the ages and even today some people use the Bible on a verse-by-verse basis to argue about some issue of modern morality or church practice. I believe this is an abuse of the Bible which usually ignores its context and genre. I also believe that this is not how debate about morality or church practice should be conducted either. Similarly, the Bible has often been used to build and formulate doctrines of the church. This is not wrong in itself, but modern trends in theology, and especially thinking about the church, within theology, have taken a different direction which gives the Bible a different role.

The last thirty years or so have seen the growth of Practical Theology (sometimes called Pastoral or Applied Theology). This is a way of doing theology which it is claimed is appropriate in a postmodern age. The basic claim is that theology does not consist solely of propositions about God which have to be signed up to. Rather theology *happens* when Christian tradition comes face to face with experience, in a context of reflection. The church provides such a context. The process of reflection itself should enable a kind of conversation between Christian tradition and a given context such that each of those can be potentially transformed by the encounter. It works like this. I read the Bible. That gives me a new insight which I want to apply to the place where I live or work or care about. The title 'Pastoral Theology'

suggests that these situations will often be ones in which questions about appropriate pastoral care are raised. Hence this will have a particular resonance with all for whom the category 'ministry' is important in some way. The change that is brought about in the situation provides me with a new insight as to the meaning of the text. And so the cycle begins again. Clearly the Bible has a crucial role in such a process.

And so I want to read the Old Testament in a way that will be *useful* in that enterprise. I want to read something that potentially will capture my imagination, and potentially transform my understanding, situation and world. I do not want to read out of idle interest or in a way which protects me from the challenges which the word of God should always present. And that means taking a special interest in why the writers wrote. Were they simple recorders, or were they too, theologians – people who wanted to make sense of their world and predicaments by reflecting again on the ancient stories about God? If they are to enter my world, I need to enter theirs – and that means something more than building sandcastles.